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AUTHOR Schechter, Harold; Semeiks, Jonna Gormely
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ABSTRACT

The popular arts are useful resources in college composition courses both because of their appeal for students and because they embody the fundamental patterns, or archetypes, found in myths, fairy tales, and classic literature. The nine basic archetypes examined in certain composition classes at Queens College (Flushing, New York) are the Shadow, the Trickster, the Temptress, the Good Mother, the Wise Old Man, the Helpful Animal, the Holy Fool, the Quest, and Rebirth. Students can find examples of such archetypes--for example, the Shadow, which is one of the easiest to recognize and to understand--in classic literature, television shows, myths, and popular songs. Students can participate in a variety of composition activities related to the popular arts, including studying and writing about language techniques employed in the popular arts, writing about situations involving their personal "shadows" (the sides of themselves that they fear and try to hide), discussing and writing about the "shadow" of the United States, writing about the portrayal in rock music of woman as Temptress, and writing short essays about the archetypal patterns in specific rock songs, fairy and folk tales, advertisements, comic strips, and myths. (GT)

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Harold Schechter and
Jonna Gormely Semeiks
English Department
Queens College, CUNY
Flushing, New York 11367

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Patterns in Popular Culture:
The Use of Popular Art in the Composition Course

Since the popular arts--comic books, detective stories, advertisements, rock and country-western songs, science-fiction movies and so on--infrequently put in an appearance in the college classroom, we are going to assume that some members of the audience are silently asking two questions. The first is, why should we use the popular arts in the composition course, and the second is how does one use them. The first question raises the issue of the value of art aimed deliberately at the mass market. The second reflects the feeling that this art is chaotic, undisciplined--perhaps even immature--and hence impossible to organize in any meaningful way.

To answer the first question--why should the teacher use this material in his or her writing course--first. Our sense of the value of the popular arts in the classroom was, in the beginning, less theoretical than pragmatic. We

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noted that students responded enthusiastically when a rock song, television program or movie was made the basis of a discussion prior to writing. Any teacher of composition knows how important student enthusiasm and interest are--and also how difficult it often is to generate these feelings in the classroom. In addition, students know a great deal about popular culture; it is, in effect, their natural medium. They are never bored or intimidated by it. They have solid ideas and strong opinions which they express with confidence, verve, and conviction. They are eager to explore, for example, the reasons for the popularity of a particular film such as Animal House or Star Wars or the lasting appeal of a fairy tale. Teachers can find such discussions fertile ground for the cultivation of writing exercises.

There is another reason why the popular arts are worthy of study in the college classroom, and that reason lies precisely in their mass appeal. Pop culture possesses enormous authority and exerts a major influence on all our lives. Even when a work cannot be examined profitably on the basis of its aesthetic qualities, demanding questions of another sort can and ought to be asked of it. We should add that some works of popular art are aesthetically sophisticated and so can be examined in traditional ways.

The second hypothetical question we raised was how one uses pop culture in the classroom. Can comic books and Sunday comic strips, rock songs, advertisements and movies be organized in any meaningful, systematic fashion? We

think they can. We have found that a very fruitful approach to the popular arts is the one afforded by literary myth criticism. The premise is that certain fundamental patterns or "archetypes"--stories, characters, themes, situations--are repeated again and again in myths, fairy tales, and classic literature regardless of the culture or historical period that gives birth to them, though of course local habitation and historical circumstance modify the archetypes in interesting ways. But these same patterns also appear in popular art; indeed, it is often easier to distinguish them there than in more complex, highly elaborated texts. As Northrop Frye points out in Anatomy of Criticism, one definition of popular literature is that it is "literature which affords an unobstructed view of archetypes." Such archetypes are ubiquitous because they give formal expression to universal human experiences and perceptions. And because they appear in both "classic" and popular art, one of the interesting things a teacher can do is compare their treatment--their elaboration as well as the intentions of the artists in using them--in the two kinds of art. Or a teacher might want to compare the different treatment of an archetype in two myths originating in two different cultures. The changes one can ask students to ring on the archetypes that shape popular art are exceptionally varied; and we will return later to a more concrete discussion of the kinds of questions a teacher might pose.

What are some of the archetypes that appear frequently in both classic literature and popular culture? Let us say

first that, though we are using the term archetype in this talk, and though our approach is drawn largely from the theories of Jung, in the classroom we try to avoid using technical language or concepts. Therefore, we usually speak of patterns instead of archetypes and avoid psychoanalytic terminology in general when we discuss the significance of these patterns with the students. Our method is, first, to define the patterns, then to explain their meaning. We bring in works which embody these images; we have the students look for and bring in examples from their television watching, movie going, magazine reading, and so forth. Then we use this material as the basis for classroom discussion and writing.

The nine basic patterns we examine in the classroom and in our textbook, Patterns in Popular Culture: A Sourcebook for Writers (Harper & Row: forthcoming, February, 1980), which grows out of our composition courses, are the Shadow, the Trickster, the Temptress, the Mother, the Wise Old Man, the Helpful Animal, the Holy Fool, the Hero's Quest, and Rebirth. These nine patterns, again, are drawn largely from Jung's analyses of the major archetypes of what he calls the collective unconscious.

We'd like to examine the Shadow in some detail today. We usually begin with this figure in our writing courses because it's one of the easiest of the archetypes to recognize and understand the larger meaning of, and because students can readily think of many examples of it on their own once they've been introduced to the pattern. The shadow

is a figure in myths, fairy tales, serious fiction, films, comic books and so on that represents or embodies the opposite of everything the hero stands for. The shadow usually appears in certain typical forms--evil double, mysterious stranger, fiendish alter-ego, and (perhaps the commonest form of all) the dark or hostile brother. Examples range from Cain to Mr. Hyde to Spencer Brydon's doppelgänger in Jamess story "The Jolly Corner" to Professor Corwin, the character in a television show that was on a couple of nights ago called "The Dark Side of Terror," about a man cloned into good and evil duplicates. The ads for this show were interesting; they showed a picture of the leading character which was a kind of composite photograph: one side of his face was normal, while the other was a negative image. And that's precisely what the shadow represents: it's the negative image of the hero-figure, everything the hero is not. Whereas the hero is a paragon, an ideal personality, who stands for law, order, morality, etc., the shadow is the very principle of lawlessness and disorder.

It's easy to recognize the meaning of this archetypal image--what universal human fact or experience it symbolizes. Jung talks of the shadow as a symbol of the repressed personal unconscious, but as we have said, we avoid using technical jargon. What we would say to our students in explanation of this frequently recurring image is this: "Every human being has a shadow side. It is that side of ourselves which is the exact opposite of what we would ideally like to be, of what we like other people to think we are.

The shadow is that part of ourselves we consider inferior or feel guilty or ashamed about, which we try to hide from everybody else and even, sometimes, from ourselves." Most students know the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; and when, at this time, we ask, "What does Mr. Hyde's name mean, why is he called Mr. Hyde?," they suddenly understand. Students begin to see the underlying themes in the pop art they have always taken very much for granted; they enjoy thinking and talking about the reasons for its appeal, how it relates to their lives, why they respond to it as deeply as they do.

One of our students, after our initial discussion of the shadow archetypes, excitedly brought into class the next day a song by Billy Joel as an example. It's called "The Stranger," and it's a perfect representation of this motif. Its opening lines are: "Well we all have a face that we hide away forever/ And we take them out and show ourselves when everyone has gone." Not a grammatical song, but a very interesting one. Our definition and discussion, the material we bring in, and the examples the students find start them thinking, not only about the meaning of the art they enjoy, but also about themselves. And this approach makes their own experience available to them as a subject for writing. In regard to the pattern we have been discussing, for instance, we might have students talk and write about the ways in which their own shadow personalities--or those of people close to them--sometimes come to the surface.

Let us repeat that we don't limit ourselves to

popular material, but use it in conjunction with other kinds of literature. For example, when we deal with the shadow, we might Xerox and distribute copies of the Egyptian myth of Osiris and his even brother Set, and the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale "The Singing Bone," which is also about the hostile brother. In addition, we generally assign a collection of classic short stories. One which has been particularly useful is Michael Timko's 38 Short Stories. When looking at the shadow, we might, for instance, assign "The Secret Sharer"; when dealing with the Quest, Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"; when discussing Rebirth, Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," and so forth. In this way, students see how these themes are universally present in the imaginative products of humankind. Also, we can in this way begin to discuss distinctions between more and less sophisticated kinds of writing and art.

Let us quickly run through some examples of the other patterns we examine. First, there's the Trickster figure, the compulsive prankster, the born troublemaker who cannot abide tranquility and is only happy when he is making the life of some stuffy authority figure miserable. The current hit movie Animal House is a good example of the trickster myth (and the success of that basically crude, amateurish film is good evidence of the perennial appeal of this archetype). Others include screen comedians like the Marx Brothers, television con men like Sgt. Bilko and Hogan's Heroes, and, of course, Bugs Bunny, whom we usually discuss in relation to his mythic forebears, showing how he evolved from a West African rabbit-trickster named "Soamba"

into the nineteenth-century folk figure Brer Rabbit and finally into the wisecracking cartoon hero.

We spend some time discussing the Temptress archetype, the femme fatale, the lovely but lethal woman who bewitches men with her beauty, then lures them to destruction. We discuss this fantasy figure as an expression of some deeply rooted male fear of female potency. Pop culture is full of images of vampiric women, some examples of which we'll show in a moment.

Other archetypal patterns include the Good Mother, the symbol of nourishment, protection, comfort--sustenance both spiritual and physical. We discuss examples of secular madonnas and modern-day earth mother goddesses--such as Ma Joad, Mother Tums ("Tell me where it hurts"), Sara Lee, and many more Magna Mater types.

There's the Wise Old Man, the male counterpart of the good mother goddess--an embodiment of insight and sagacity who serves as the young hero's mentor, tutor and guide. Again, we define this figure's essential traits: how, when the hero is in a desperate situation he can't extricate himself from or figure a way out of, the wise old man will unexpectedly appear, in a blaze of light, a symbol of saving insight and illumination. We bring in examples: Teiresias the ancient Greek seer, whose blindness to the outer world is a sign of his superior <u>in</u>sight; Merlin; Tolkien's Gandalf the Grey; and Shazam.

Other figures associated with wisdom, but of a somewhat different sort, include the Helpful Animal--symbol of

instinctual wisdom--and the Holy Fool.

Finally, there are the patterns of the Quest and Rebirth. We explain the structure of the quest as Joseph Campbell outlines it--Call to Adventure, Separation from the everyday world, Threshold Crossing, Descent into the Realm of Darkness, the Road of Ordeals, Supernatural Aid, Winning of the Boon and Return--and show how it is present in works ranging from Thor comic books to Greek myths to slick Hollywood productions like the movie version of Journey to the Center of the Earth (which we sometimes arrange to show in our classes). Finally, we conclude with images of rebirth, and examine how pop culture often plays on very deeply rooted, even religious yearnings for renewal, transformation, a new life.

We've chosen some slides which embody some of the archetypes we've been talking about, and we would like to show them now. (SLIDES ARE SHOWN.)

These, then, are the major patterns we deal with and the terms we present them in. The question now becomes how exactly do we use them as the basis for a composition course? One point we'd like particularly to stress is this: we believe our approach offers a very interesting and rewarding way into the material. At a glance, comic books and similar kinds of mass art seem so simple and sometimes so simple-minded that the teacher's immediate response is likely to be, "What in the world can one say about these things?" But once we begin to see popular art as an expression of shared fantasies and universal human concerns, it suddenly becomes

a very rich and fascinating source of subjects for writing and discussion purposes.

Moreover, although most pop culture works the composition class might examine cannot be used as prose models, questions about tone, syntax, diction, figurative language, rhetorical strategy, and audience are as appropriate to them as they are to serious literature, since popular art employs language, just as serious writing does, to produce a particular effect on particular audiences. Such questions help a student understand <u>how</u> a country-western song, for example, works and <u>why</u> it works. And of course, questions like these, and writing assignments based on them, offer other approaches to the material besides the archetypal.

While nearly all popular art falls into two categories of prose composition--description and especially narration--the teacher can and should ask his or her students to respond to it by performing every kind of writing exercise: definition, classification, comparison and contrast, process analysis, causal analysis, interpretation and evaluation, and argumentation. Writing assignments can--and should--vary in difficulty from relatively easy personal experience or autobiographical essays to much more difficult considerations of large cultural issues and problems. For instance, when talking about the shadow, we frequently ask each student either to describe a situation in which he felt like an outsider, an outcast or an alien, to say what happened, and to describe his emotions at the time, or to write an essay describing his shadow--that side of him or herself he is most afraid of or made uneasy by, that side which is always

kept hidden, perhaps even from his own sight. A much more ambitious undertaking is to ask the entire class to speculate on the nature of America's shadow, approaching this topic by first deciding what America's conscious identity is, its deliberately defined character, the public "face" it shows to the world, and then deciding what its underside, its private face, is. A discussion such as this must obviously be channeled and pruned before it can be turned into coherent, controlled student essays and so the teacher can demonstrate the role of the classification of "evidence," of outlining, and of the thesis statement.

When the temptress archetype is being studied in popular art, the teacher might ask the students to argue either that rock music is (as many critics have maintained) or is not sexist and hostile to women, portraying women in negative, demeaning and/or stereotypical ways. Students can use as their evidence as many rock songs as they like--the temptress appears again and again in them--and should be encouraged to quote lyrics frequently to support their opinions and to illustrate individual points. Or students might be asked to write an essay arguing whether women really do have the kind of power over men the temptress figure implies that they have--power to attract and delight but also to enslave, to degrade, to drain of vitality, purpose and even identity. Or, since the kind of man who, in popular art, succumbs to the temptress is nearly always a soldier, adventurer, explorer, leader, or cowboy, students could be asked to analyze why these men are apparently most

vulnerable to her.

Because we've shown an ad for Alpha Keri Bath Oil as an example of the rebirth archetype, we'd like to suggest some writing assignments keyed specifically to it. A teacher might ask his students to agree or disagree with the frequently expressed notion that America is a youth-oriented nation: that we are obsessed with looking young and terrified of old age and death. The Alpha Keri ad could be used, as only one of a number of different kinds of cultural evidence, to support this notion. Or perhaps the teacher might want to assign a very brief in-class writing exercise, one designed to yield only a paragraph which could then be read aloud--or written on the blackboard--and scrutinized carefully. He or she might ask students to ignore the copy of the ad and concentrate only on its visual aspects, analyzing what effect the lighting has, why the woman is positioned as she is, what effect her nudity has, and so on.

What you can do with the Alpha Keri ad in twenty minutes--namely, generate a short, complete essay--can be done with countless examples of popular art. Rock songs, fairy and folk tales, advertisements, comic strips, myths, are almost always short enough to be examined in class, discussed briefly, and written about, unlike the traditional essay or narrative, which is usually either so long or so complex that valuable time must be spent explicating it. Besides its appeal to the students, then, pop culture possesses a tremendous advantage to the teacher who is eager to get on with the legitimate business of the composition

class: which is, of course, having students write and evaluating that writing.

We'd like to close this talk by quoting Marshal McCluhan, who said in a television interview once that "although most TV shows are appalling in themselves, they can become quite delightful when looked at for their hidden cultural significance." It's hard to argue with McCluhan here: there are lots of television shows and other works of popular entertainment that are indeed pretty appalling, at least when they are judged by the standards of serious art. This does not mean that all pop culture is bad art; on the contrary, many works--early American comic strips, for example, and many movies--have a great deal of aesthetic merit; some are quite marvelous. But even the crudest and most simpleminded of popular works have, as McCluhan suggests, important things to teach us about our lives. The composition instructor should not feel that he is pandering to the lowest common denominator by using pop art in the classroom. On the contrary, an approach such as the one we've suggested gives him a special opportunity to engage the interest of his students, while turning them from uncritical consumers into people who can think, talk, and write intelligently about material which deeply affects all our lives.